

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

10th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday
8 June 2022

PE1804: Halt Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd's Air Traffic Management Strategy

Note by the Clerk

Lodged on 6 May 2020

Petitioner Alasdair MacEachen, John Doig and Peter Henderson on behalf of Benbecula Community Council

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to halt Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd's Air Traffic Management Strategy Project to conduct an independent assessment of the decisions and decision-making process of the ATMS project.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1804>

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [18 May 2022](#). At that meeting the Committee heard evidence from Inglis Lyon, Managing Director, Highlands and Islands Airports Limited. The Committee agreed to consider the evidence heard at a future meeting.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**. A written submission from the petitioner is included in **Annexe C**.
3. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

4. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
5. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1804: Halt Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd's Air Traffic Management Strategy

Petitioner

Created by Alasdair MacEachen, John Doig and Peter Henderson on behalf of Benbecula Community Council

Date lodged

6/05/2020

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to halt Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd's Air Traffic Management Strategy Project to conduct an independent assessment of the decisions and decision-making process of the ATMS project.

Previous action

This issue has been raised with Liam McArthur MSP, Alasdair Allan MSP and Rhoda Grant MSP. It has also been raised with Alistair Carmichael MP and Angus Brendon MacNeil MP.

Background information

We call on the Scottish Government to:

1. Halt HIAL's ATMS project and conduct an independent assessment of the decisions and decision-making process of the whole ATMS project and its potential safety, economic & quality of service impacts, and make recommendations on the options for ATS provision at HIAL airports accordingly. ATCOs at all HIAL airports should be called on for evidence, as the only experts in air traffic control at HIAL airports.

2. Instruct HIAL to suspend their policy on changing the Air Traffic Services provision at Benbecula and Wick until the UK Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) have published their own official guidance to UK Air Navigation Service Provider's (such as HIAL) on the effects of European Union Authority for Aviation Safety (EASA) policy on Air Traffic Control provision.
3. Conduct an independent islands impact assessment as under the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 for all affected island communities. Highlands & Islands Airports Limited (HIAL) announced its remote tower air traffic management strategy (ATMS) involving seven of its airports in January 2018. A Business Case was approved by the Board in December 2019, which listed four main challenges to ensure the resilience of Air Traffic Control (ATC) operations and the continuation of safe, efficient air travel through the Highlands and Islands:
 - Low staff numbers and difficulties with resilience, recruitment and retention have, in some instances, led to airport closures
 - The changing regulatory environment and compliance with new policies on safe service provision requires change
 - The urgent need to modernise an ageing infrastructure and outdated methods of controlling air traffic
 - The need to create a competitive edge in the operation and ultimately deliver a more sustainable and cost-effective service

We believe that difficulties with recruitment and retention have existed only at a minority of HIAL airports. This can be overcome by local recruitment as suggested in Highlands & Islands Enterprise's EKOS report where it states that "grow your own'... [has] been successful for HIAL in recruiting – this should continue in some form to address future staffing requirements". HIAL ATCO salaries have in the recent past been considerably less than the industry standard and may have been a factor in the retention of staff at some of HIALs locations.

We agree that the changing regulatory environment and compliance with new policies on safe service provision requires change, however, we do not believe HIAL's ATMS provides the best answer for HIAL airports. The option chosen by HIAL is the costliest and riskiest as stated in their own Helios report.

We agree there is a need to modernise ageing equipment and infrastructure, but this could be done at each airport without the need to

move the ATC service to a centralised facility or downgrading the Air Traffic service provision.

We do not agree that HIAL's plans for ATMS will deliver a more sustainable and cost-effective service. In fact, in the long term the reverse may occur due to the expensive new infrastructure itself needing to be replaced after a number of years of service in a hostile environment (climate) and the extra Air Traffic Engineering support required to maintain the day to day integrity of these new systems.

We believe that quality of service of scheduled flights to the communities served at the seven airports may be compromised due to the potential for an increase in flight delays, cancellations and airport closures at Stornoway, Inverness, Sumburgh, Kirkwall & Dundee due to:

- Communications failures / malfunctions between the remote airport & Inverness centre.
- Equipment failures / malfunctions at the Inverness Centre may lead to airport closures.
- Operational limits of cameras – the maximum wind speed they can operate in before camera shake makes visuals unusable
- Maintenance of cameras due to salt corrosion and scouring on the lens by wind-blown sand / particles. There will be delays in repairing outages of cameras and associated equipment as Air Traffic Engineering (ATE) support staff need to be detached in.
- Loss of runway availability – existing digital remote towers do not support cross runway operations. Some runways will be closed resulting in more flight cancellations due to cross winds.

At Benbecula and Wick airports the use of an Aerodrome Flight Information Service (AFIS) in non-visual conditions in particular, would cause a significant increase in the number of flight delays compared to the present ATC service. No positive deconfliction advice to aircraft pilots in the air is possible with AFIS. (An AFIS current Licencing and legal issue).

We believe that the proposals will have a significant long-term adverse economic impact on the communities of Caithness, Orkney, Shetland, and the Western Isles through:

1. The relocation or loss of well-paid and high skilled ATC jobs at HIAL airports, particularly within the more rural and 'fragile' communities, and the loss of spouse and partner's jobs from the communities.
2. Loss of ATC associated jobs, e.g. air traffic and admin support staff.
3. A reduction in customer confidence caused by extensive new delays, technical failures, safety concerns and airfield limitations.
4. In communities reliant on airport accessibility for economic activity, a 'downgrade' of the airports at Benbecula and Wick will result in a reduction or end of the use of the airport by the following (because the norm is an ATC service): -
 - Ad-hoc civil charter flights at Benbecula in support of the Hebrides Ranges.
 - Aeroplane manufacturers for test flights in non-visual conditions.
 - The potential for new scheduled operators to be attracted to these airports or a change in status with the present scheduled service operator.
 - Ad-hoc tourism flights

We believe the ATMS plans will reduce the safety of services provided at all airports operated by HIAL due to the following reasons: -

1. Currently Meteorological (MET) observations are carried out by Air Traffic Controllers or MET qualified support staff who use local knowledge of geography and topography to assess the MET conditions. Instruments can be used as an aid to observations if necessary. Due to limitations of MET instruments they can be incorrect and the MET observer can disregard readings when appropriate. MET observations under ATMS will completely rely on instruments which will create high risks in these very exposed airports where weather conditions can be a considerable hazard to aircraft.
2. The potential for reduced safety in the air at Benbecula and Wick:
 - A downgrade to Aerodrome Flight Information Service will result in pilots receiving only generic information on any

conflicting aircraft, with the pilots themselves having to resolve any conflicts based on the information received. Positive deconfliction advice to aircraft in the air would not be possible due to current legislation and AFIS licencing. Air Traffic Controllers provide a layer of safety which will be removed from scheduled passenger flights, ambulance flights, transiting military aircraft, private visiting aircraft and helicopters used by local businesses such as fish-farms.

- Benbecula has military Ranges in the vicinity, and both airports have nearby aeronautical Danger Areas which can, if active, affect aircraft flight paths and profiles in/out of these airports
- By relying on new, largely untested technologies, we are exposing Air Traffic Services to a suite of new, never seen before safety risks and points of failure which do not exist within current operations. Historically HIAL have never done this because of the risk – we ask what is their rationale for changing policy now?
- Multi-mode operations have been suggested by HIAL. This involves Air Traffic Controllers operating several airports and/or approaches simultaneously. This suggested concept is unproven and may come with additional safety risks.
- Safety critical local knowledge of geography, weather, facilities and much more will be lost, replaced with a “remote Air Traffic Controller” who will lack such awareness.
- Air Traffic Controllers currently look out a window to ensure the safety of aircraft in their vicinity. Seeing aircraft, obstructions, obstacles and everything else is more challenging when looking at a TV screen.
- Situational awareness is essential to aircraft safety. A digital remote tower will compress a 360 degrees’ view across 270 degrees on the TV screens, making situation awareness far more difficult.
- Being absolutely reliant on technology means technology failures will be another new risk factor which does not exist at present.

- Cyber security – air traffic services across the entire Highlands and Islands region will be IT based. A cyber-attack against any part of it would have the potential to shut down the entire operation, exposing every aircraft to yet more new risks that do not currently exist.
- The majority of ATC Staff are opposed to the proposed ATMS and if they refuse to move to the new centre it could be necessary to staff it with ATCOs who have no previous experience at HIAL airports. HIAL have stated that they would consider training ATCOs from scratch with training provided by instructors who haven't worked at the airports concerned. This essentially removes decades of invaluable experience, training and safety management.

We believe the technical feasibility of this project has not been proven as the implementation and delivery of the remote tower and surveillance centre is the largest and most complex project HIAL have ever undertaken and yet the HIAL's Management team delivering the project, and HIAL's board who approved the project, do not have any civil aviation qualifications. The Scoping Study (Helios Report), the basis of the ATMS project, had many errors identified in it and these have not been corrected by HIAL or given sufficient answers as to mitigation.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1804 on 18th May 2022

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of continued petitions, the first of which is PE1804, which has been lodged by Alasdair MacEachen, John Doig and Peter Henderson on behalf of Benbecula community council. As those who follow our affairs know, the petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to halt Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd's air traffic management strategy project and to conduct an independent assessment of the decisions and decision-making process of the ATMS project.

I welcome to the meeting Inglis Lyon, managing director of Highlands and Island Airports Ltd, who joins us remotely. I very much appreciate his making time available in his schedule to participate in this morning's discussion.

Members have a number of questions to ask. As we are quite familiar with the ground, having had various evidence sessions with various people, I am very happy to move straight to questions, but if there is anything that Mr Lyon would like to say in advance of that, I am very happy for him to do so.

Inglis Lyon (Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd): Thank you for agreeing to see us today and for hosting me remotely. It helps.

The Convener: That is great. I will put the first question to you and then various members of the committee will ask theirs.

I should also say that we have been joined this morning by Liam McArthur and Rhoda Grant. I am very happy to invite them to say something after committee members have asked the principal questions.

The petition was lodged before a change in HIAL's strategy, and a number of people who have given evidence to us have been suspicious of the motivation underpinning all of that. After five years of pursuing the ATM strategy, Mr Lyon, you have now changed your mind about it. Was that wholly or principally driven by financial considerations, or is there a wider basis for the change of position?

Inglis Lyon: There were a number of moving parts in the decision to take a different strategic direction. There was the industrial action, on which I would like to go into some detail; there was a financial element; there was a campaign that was run by Prospect, with support from MSPs; and there was also the output from our island communities impact assessment. Therefore, a number of different moving parts brought us to the table.

I will start with the industrial action, which comprised three different constituent elements. The first was a day of strike action. For airlines, airline passengers and airports, such action is hugely disruptive, but a day of it can be managed, because airlines will put passengers on to flights on the following or preceding dates. It is hugely disruptive and regrettable, but it is manageable.

Then there was an overtime ban, which meant that passengers were sometimes unable to get into some of the remote airfields and sometimes unable to leave them. That was hugely disruptive to tens of thousands of passengers, and it cost Loganair approximately £2 million. Again, though, that sort of thing is manageable in the grand context of what we do at Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd.

The thing that really put the bite on the organisation was when training stopped as a result of action taken by the trade union. Training is the life-blood of what we do in HIAL. A number of controllers in the control tower could not make progress, because of the industrial action, and that has had an effect on the airports that we are still working through. Indeed, things are still coming to a conclusion at Inverness airport, where we are still experiencing some closures as a result of our being unable to undertake training during the industrial action. As I have said, training is a major element for us.

There was also the financial element. When we went out to tender for the remote tower, we received four bids that ranged from being almost on budget to, in one case, being three and a half times the budget. When we examined the bids in detail, we found significant variances in how some organisations had priced risk and how some had priced cost certainty. When we looked at the matter in the round, we decided that there was considerable uncertainty in the bids that we had received. We had had a firm steer from Transport Scotland that the budget was the budget and we could not contemplate going over it. At that point, that consideration came into play.

We also had input from our island communities impact assessment, which said that there were things that we should do with the local authorities to mitigate the impact of our decisions. Therefore, we have a number of things on the go—and, indeed, had a number of things on the go at the time—to try to mitigate the impact of our decisions. One was the sustainable aviation test environment in Orkney, and you will have seen the benefits of that last week with Royal Mail's announcement of unmanned aerial vehicles covering the north and west of Scotland. We also have some exciting developments taking place in Stornoway and other developments elsewhere.

Notwithstanding all of that, it was insufficient to move the local authorities from removing an objection. There was also the campaign that Prospect and supportive MSPs were running.

If you are asking me whether the decision was made because of the finances, I would say no, it was not. Finances were part of it—they were a consideration—but

for us the principal point was to get the industrial action off the table, because it was beginning to impact on our ability to run the business and to continue to provide lifeline services to the north and west of Scotland.

The Convener: I understand all that and it is a helpful exposition of the position. It sounds—and I am choosing my words carefully—as though force majeure motivated the change in the position as opposed to a re-evaluation of HIAL’s original thinking and as though an evolution of the various points that you have just raised led to the change of heart. Is there a bitterness in HIAL that the change has been brought about and that it is not the route that you would have preferred to take?

That leads me to another question that has come up in some of the evidence that we have received. I have to say that Prospect seemed reassured on this point, but is there a commitment that the strategy that will now be followed will be sustained? Is there no suggestion that the plan is to return to the original proposal after a period of time and when there is a further window of opportunity?

Inglis Lyon: First, there is absolutely no bitterness. We have to run a business that serves remote communities in the north and west of the Highlands. As the chief executive of that business, I have to say that it is a privilege to do so. We worked incredibly closely with Prospect from last August to arrive at the position that we are at now, and credit has to go to the people involved in those discussions for getting this over the line.

Secondly, on strategy, we have agreed with Prospect to undertake a review in five years’ time. That will be an independent review and both sides will stand by its findings; of course, we cannot tie the hands of incoming boards and chief executives with regard to what will happen in five years’ time. For a five-year period from now, the original strategy will not be pursued.

The Convener: Thank you. That is clear.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Thank you, Inglis Lyon, for setting out clearly why you changed tack. You have set out compelling reasons for doing so in a candid and helpful way.

I want to ask about something that Mr Henderson raised in the previous evidence session, which was the extent to which changing tack has incurred a cost in expenditure that could fairly be described as abortive—in other words, expenditure on pursuing a model that has now been shelved for five years. What level of abortive expenditure has there been on developing the air traffic management strategy?

Inglis Lyon: When we reported that to the committee in January, and to Mr McArthur last December, we quoted a figure of £9 million. If I can give you some detail of that £9 million, it might help to put it in context.

Approximately £1.4 million of that £9 million is down to staff costs. Staff members were originally taken on to provide a bank of staff to help us manage the project, but, given some of the staff shortage issues that we were experiencing across the company, those staff members were, and continue to be, deployed in roles at other sites in HIAL. Therefore, you can subtract £1.4 million in revenue costs from that £9 million.

Contained in the capital sum is a simulator that was bought for £324,000, which will be used to train Highlands and Islands air traffic control staff for the next 10 years. Because that asset is on the books and is depreciating, it is not directly attributable to the cost of the project.

Finally, there has been much discussion around what we will do with New Century house, which was bought below market value for the purpose of housing our surveillance centre. However, things have changed, and it is now being used as a temporary training facility. We are midway through evaluating our estate in Inverness for two reasons. First, our reason for buying and holding New Century house has changed and, secondly, 67 per cent of the team at our head office, which was at capacity pre-pandemic, are now hybrid working, so we have capacity there.

We will look at matters in the round and try to determine the best way forward. If, as a result, New Century house becomes surplus to requirements, that valuable piece of real estate will be sold—we are not precious about it—and the value returned to HIAL. We should also bear in mind that it was bought at below market value.

Fergus Ewing: So the headline figure of £9 million needs to be reduced by various factors. Although the cost was incurred in pursuit of a project that has been shelved, the expenditure is serving other valuable purposes for HIAL—I understand that.

Are you able to say what you expect the price range for the sale of New Century house to be in relation to its purchase? Would the sale, as you seem to imply, further reduce the £9 million cost by perhaps producing a profit?

Inglis Lyon: Yes, that is correct. I do not want to go into the commercial details just now, but on the assumption that we would realise a price similar to the purchase price, that £9 million would reduce to circa £5.5 million.

Fergus Ewing: Okay. As you will understand, it is not the function of this committee to go into matters in detail; we simply give voice to petitioners who come to the Parliament with a cause and seek transparency and accountability. It is not our purpose to go into the issue in detail—it is our job to decide whether someone else should do so.

Therefore, I have a simple question. Would you support HIAL's handling of the air traffic management strategy process being the subject of an external review by an organisation such as Audit Scotland?

Inglis Lyon: We would welcome that, Mr Ewing. We have no issue with that at all, whether it is done by Audit Scotland or A N Other. We might query whether Audit Scotland was the right body, for no other reason than it has not audited HIAL thus far—we have our own external auditors—but I am very happy with the principle.

Fergus Ewing: Is there any other body that you think could carry out an audit? I am mindful that any body looking into the matter would have to have rather more than a rudimentary understanding of the air traffic control issues, which are, as we have heard from the Civil Aviation Authority, fairly complex. I had pondered whether Audit Scotland is in fact the right body, for the reasons that you have stated. Can you suggest any way in which public accountability could be achieved by a body that has a reasonable knowledge of the issues involved, which would be essential to do a proper job?

Inglis Lyon: There might be an opportunity for peer review. There are a number of capable organisations in the Scottish Government that could undertake a degree of peer review. There might also be an opportunity for the committee to speak directly with our external auditors, who audit us on a number of—[Inaudible.]—on a routine basis. [Inaudible.]

Fergus Ewing: That completes my questions. I think that I just lost the last word or so of what you said, but I hope that everybody else heard you.

The Convener: No, we did not. I am sorry, but we lost the last sentence, Mr Lyon. Could you conclude that point again?

Inglis Lyon: I said that I was happy to make that connection with our external auditors, who are an independent company, if you wanted to speak to them about carrying out that kind of review.

The Convener: That is great—thank you.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning, Mr Lyon. The lack of engagement with local communities on the future of air traffic control in the areas concerned caused real problems. Why was there a lack of engagement? Can you assure us that, if anything is going to change in the future strategy for the area, you will engage with the communities?

Inglis Lyon: Good morning—it is nice to meet you.

Prior to announcing the strategy, the company that did the work for us undertook a number of engagements. After announcing the strategy, and up to the beginning of the pandemic, we undertook more than 200 different sets of engagement across the Highlands and Islands. During the pandemic, and to date, we have taken a very different approach to our community engagement, and we were recently held up by one local authority as an example of best practice. Where we are today is therefore a long way from where we were at the start of the episode, if you like.

Would we, with the benefit of hindsight, do things differently? I think that we have learned, and we will continue with that approach as we go forward. As I have said, a local authority has held us up as an example of best practice. That is good to hear, and it is a good benchmark to set for ourselves.

David Torrance: Why were HIAL staff and recognised trade unions not involved in the development of the air traffic management strategy from the outset? How do you intend to involve staff in the development of any future strategies? Would that not have helped industrial relations?

Inglis Lyon: Yes. Some of the staff were involved prior to announcing the outcome of the strategy. Since the revised strategic direction, we have worked with our staff to help inform the discussion by setting up a number of working groups, which I am sure Prospect would confirm has helped build a number of bridges. If you were to ask me whether we have built enough bridges or repaired enough of the bridges, I would say no—that is work in progress.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The committee has heard concerns that HIAL management places too much faith in “Air Traffic Management 2030 Strategy: Scoping Study”, which was produced by the consultant Helios, and the results of which relied significantly on emerging new technology. How do you respond to those concerns?

Inglis Lyon: Helios provided a report with a number of options. The recommended option was the way the board decided to go at that point in time. It could have chosen another option, but it decided to choose the one that was recommended as the first option. Since then, that board has moved on to pastures new, and we have a new board. In June 2020, I think, the new board sat down and went through all the available evidence and confirmed that the decision to pursue the strategy that we had was the right decision.

At that point, we had also employed a new chief operating officer who was given carte blanche to review everything and decide whether we were still pursuing the right strategy. He also came to that conclusion. Helios had provided options, if you like, and the board decided to pursue the recommended option.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Mr Lyon, communities were very fearful and anxious about the whole process, and they still are. There is no question but that they feel that there might be loss, reduction or diminution of services that they expect.

Can you give assurances to the communities that are served by HIAL airports that there will not be a reduction or diminution of services or aviation safety resulting from roll-out of the new air traffic control system and procedures? As I said, people are still very fearful about what is planned and what will happen.

Inglis Lyon: First of all, I thank you for raising the issue of safety. Whatever we do in HIAL airports is always about improving on levels of safety. We operate in one of the most highly regulated industries not only in the UK but in the world, so whatever we

do must, therefore, lift safety. We do not compromise; what we have in the Highlands and Islands today is safe, and we have an opportunity to make it safer, which is what we intend to do.

On diminution of services, again I say that the idea is that the changes that we hope to introduce will achieve one of our core objectives, which is to improve resilience. One of the reasons for embarking on the strategy in the first place was to improve resilience. We cannot be in the position in which we found ourselves at a couple of airports where we were struggling to achieve manning levels and had closures.

Again, if one thing has been demonstrated in the pandemic, it is our ability to keep real lifeline services going for remote communities, and this all been about preserving and enhancing those links.

Alexander Stewart: Supporting those services and ensuring that communities have them is the crux of the matter. What lessons have you learned from the whole fiasco, which has had communities and MSPs up in arms? What have you learned from dealing with that over the past five years, and how can you put lessons that you might have learned into practice in order to ensure that there will be practical action for communities who are still anxious about what might come out of the process?

Inglis Lyon: I shared something with one of your colleagues who is at the committee today when the same question was asked of me when we met. I said that the idea of sharing the challenges that we have early on would be very helpful to us, and to your good selves. We should take an open-book approach to sharing the challenges and working on solutions, whether they are joint solutions or us simply telling folk what is going on. For me, improvement of such communication is the biggest lesson that we could learn.

I go back to the point that I made earlier, which is that we have moved our communication and information flow on to such an extent that one of the local authorities says that we are an example of best practice. We are proud of what we do and I would like to see it continue, because that will ensure that there are no surprises.

The Convener: Those were the formal questions from committee members. We also have two colleagues with us this morning. I would very much like to give both Liam McArthur and Rhoda Grant the opportunity either simply to make an observation or to put a question, given the importance of the issue and the fact that this evidence session is almost the final opportunity for the committee to consider all the various bits of evidence that we have received.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Thank you, convener, and good morning, Inglis.

In response to questions from the committee, you said earlier that, with hindsight, things would have been done differently. I think that we can all be accused of having wisdom with hindsight, but having lived this process for a number of years—if not all five of them—it seems to me that hindsight was not really necessary. Very much from the outset, there were concerns expressed that the cost calculations and estimates were wide of the mark in relation to what would actually be required to

deliver the work safely and successfully. They were out of alignment with what many people within the sector were suggesting.

Staff's concerns about the proposals and the implications for jobs, including in the islands, were evident from the get go. The opposition within local communities, including local authorities, again, was evident. HIAL's consultants identified the remote tower model as the most complex and risky of the options, yet over the course of the four or five years that I engaged with HIAL, I was told repeatedly and the public were told repeatedly, through public statements, that that was the only viable option to deliver safely and in accordance with changing regulations, the air traffic management system that is required across the Highlands and Islands. I appreciate that we are now in a different place, but it is difficult to accept that one needed hindsight to arrive at that conclusion. There is real anger and frustration that it has taken the best part of five years to get to a conclusion that many people arrived at pretty much from the get go. That is just for the record; it is not a question, but an observation.

I welcome your response to the question that Fergus Ewing asked about the audit. Over and above that, Peter Henderson previously expressed concern that we could find ourselves in a similar situation in relation to centralised radar surveillance. Again, HIAL is taking forward a proposal, and there are concerns among staff at each of the airfields about its implications. Those concerns are not being given due weight; we could, some way down the line, again be dealing with a similar situation, in which HIAL will be forced to reconsider the proposals.

What assurance can you give us that that is not the case and that staff concerns in relation to centralised radar surveillance will be taken properly into account?

Inglis Lyon: Thank you for the question. I am disappointed to hear about that concern. We have continued the working parties and announced the revised strategy. In terms of how we deliver it, I will say, to be completely honest with you, that the number of attendees at the working parties has dropped dramatically since we announced the strategy. The working parties had the opportunity to say, "This is good," "This is bad," or "We are indifferent." I will take that concern away and discuss it with Prospect. I will try to find a way to encourage more participation at the working parties, to ensure that we have the right level of feedback between the units—
[Inaudible.]

Liam McArthur: I have a final question. Obviously, one of the drivers for the move to remote towers was concern about recruitment and retention of air traffic control staff in certain airports. I and others expressed concern that that was not necessarily an issue at some airports. HIAL has a track record of recruiting and retaining staff very successfully when it has embarked on local recruitment exercises, but when it tried to recruit ready-made air traffic controllers from Sweden and elsewhere as a short-term option, it ended up reaping the whirlwind, because those staff were always going to leave. Is there an assurance from HIAL that, in going forward with the new model, there will be a return to recruiting from local communities? Not just for HIAL, but across the public and private sectors, that approach has demonstrated itself to be a far more effective way of identifying people. They might be people for whom you might need to provide additional training, but they are far more likely to remain within the organisation for the medium to longer term.

Inglis Lyon: We had a good discussion up in Shetland the other week, where we have just approved exactly that approach. A young lady who entered at assistant level is now moving to trainee air traffic controller level.

We will always maintain jobs from the local employment market. However, there will be occasions on which we have to fish in the bigger pool, because that is what we need for a short-term fix. Therefore, although the primary source of employment should always be our local hinterland, there will be occasions on which we do that. That is just the nature of our business. However, where possible, staff are certainly local. You will also see that the posts that we have advertised, provided that they are not operational, are based all over the country—all over the northern—[Inaudible.]

The Convener: Rhoda Grant—do you have an observation or a question?

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I have a bit of both, convener.

I will not go over ground that has been covered by the committee, apart from to say that I am pleased that Prospect and HIAL are working so well together and that staff are now involved in the working groups.

There is a level of distrust about why we have reached this point and what has brought us here, about which you answered a question at the beginning of the meeting. I suppose that the independent review in five years is what is causing people some concern. Is this just a pause? Will that review bring us back to where we once were?

First, how do you rebuild trust, not just with the workforce—I understand from you and Prospect that that work is on-going—but with the communities that you serve?

Inglis Lyon: Our teams are closer to us, so work with the community is going to be a longer-term project. As I said, we have started to roll out our revised engagement programme, and it seems to be yielding benefits. From speaking to a lot of MSPs, MPs and local authorities, the feedback is positive about the change, and it is equally positive about the level of engagement—about the honesty and transparency that we are sharing in those engagement sessions. This is part of what is needed, Rhoda—that we get to the point at which, ultimately, you know as much about the business as we do. If we can get to that point, that will help.

Rhoda Grant: Okay. Thank you. Radar for Shetland airport, which is the one airport that uses remote radar at the moment, was to transfer from NATS to HIAL, but there has been a delay. What are the reasons for that, and does it augur well for centralisation to Inverness of radar for the other airports?

Inglis Lyon: Shetland is a greenfield site. As far as I know, the Civil Aviation Authority has not done that before, in Scotland. Certainly, we have not done such a complex project before. The airport is slightly behind in respect of some staffing issues—for example, training. Once those are out of the way, as is close to being the case, we will be able to learn from that project where we will go from there.

Rhoda Grant: Is there an option to have the radar controlled locally at the airports, which would create more jobs? That would almost be to go in the opposite direction

of travel from what was happening previously. Using the recruitment approach that Liam McArthur talked about, local people might be recruited and trained. That would create more jobs in the local communities, where they are desperately needed.

Inglis Lyon: One of the issues that we have talked about today and previously is resilience. If the people are all under one roof, somebody could be controlling radar for Sumburgh on Monday, for example, and then could, because of sickness, illness or absences in Stornoway, be controlling it for Stornoway on Tuesday, then maybe for Kirkwall on Wednesday. By having the people under one roof, we are able to get resilience; we can get the economy of scale that builds resilience into the airports. That is the basis on which we agreed the compromise with Prospect and their colleagues in the tower.

Rhoda Grant: However, you would not revisit that—you would not look at it again. I am conscious that that might be a way to rebuild trust and to reassure the communities that you want to work with them, too.

Inglis Lyon: I suggest that that would be considered as part of the five-year review.

The Convener: I am grateful, Mr Lyon. Is there anything that we have not covered that you would like to address in a final observation or comment?

Inglis Lyon: No, thank you.

The Convener: Thank you for your evidence this morning. We appreciate very much the time that you have given and the comprehensive way in which you have answered questions from committee members and our visiting colleagues.

Members, are you content to consider the evidence that we have heard today at a future meeting?

[Members indicated agreement.]

The Convener: The committee agrees, in which case I will suspend the meeting. Thank you, again, for your participation.

Inglis Lyon: Thank you for your time. Goodbye.

Annexe C

Petitioner submission of 01 June 2022

PE1804/YY - Halt Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd's Air Traffic Management Strategy

During the meeting of 18th May Rhoda Grant questioned Inglis Lyon about the Sumburgh Radar project delays.

Inglis stated that the Sumburgh Radar project is complex, a green field site and that the CAA had not done that in Scotland before. He also stated that HIAL had not done such a complex project before.

Had he forgotten that HIAL introduced a radar service at Inverness 15 years ago? He was Managing Director of HIAL at the time so should have remembered. Inverness Radar was a green field site with a new radar system and required additional Controllers to be recruited and trained. Inverness was a more complex project for HIAL than Sumburgh as it meant the creation of a new radar service from scratch. Sumburgh Radar on the other hand has existed for decades.

Inglis Lyon also said that Sumburgh Radar was slightly behind in training. I have heard that training given to staff for the Sumburgh Radar project has been declared invalid and has to be started again from the beginning. This will further delay the project by a year. If correct then the project is not slightly behind but years behind schedule. This bodes badly for a centralised radar service for all HIAL ATC airports.

On a final note, delays cost the public purse money yet nobody seems to be able to hold HIAL management to account, least of all the HIAL Board, which is odd considering that is their main job.